

Wb Yeats

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W. B. Yeats — Easter 1916, The Second Coming, Sailing to Byzantium, A Prayer for My Daughter

Overview — the story in simple English

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was an Irish poet who won the Nobel Prize (নোবেল পুরস্কার) in 1923. Your syllabus has four of his most famous poems, and they all connect to his life and to the history of Ireland. **Easter 1916** is about a real event: on Easter Monday 1916, a group of Irish rebels (বিদ্রোহী) rose against British rule in Dublin; the rising failed and its leaders were executed (মৃত্যুদণ্ড দেওয়া হয়). Yeats, who had doubts about violent politics, was shocked into writing a poem that honours the dead rebels as martyrs (শহীদ) while still asking whether their sacrifice was worth the cost. **The Second Coming**, written in 1919 after World War I, is a prophecy (ভবিষ্যদ্বাণী): Yeats believed history moves in 2000-year cycles which he called "gyres" (spinning cones), and he felt Christian civilization was collapsing while a frightening new age waited to be born. **Sailing to Byzantium** is about old age: an old man leaves the sensual (ইন্দ্রিয়সুখপূর্ণ) world of the young and sails to Byzantium — the ancient holy city of art — where he wishes to become a golden bird, an immortal (অমর) work of art that never grows old or dies. **A Prayer for My Daughter** was written just after The Second Coming: standing over his baby daughter Anne's cradle during a storm, Yeats prays that she may grow up with kindness, courtesy (সৌজন্য) and rooted innocence — not with the dangerous beauty and hateful opinions that, he believed, wasted women like Maud Gonne, the woman he loved for years but never married. Together the four poems show Yeats's biggest concerns: Irish politics, the violent turning of history, the pain of old age, and the shelter of art, custom and ceremony. Read them as one connected journey, and every major exam question becomes easier.

💡 **One-line meaning: In these four poems Yeats turns Irish politics, world chaos, old age and a father's fear into one vision — history moves in violent cycles, and only art, sacrifice and rooted tradition can give life lasting meaning.**

Quick Facts	Details
Poet	William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), Irish; Nobel Prize in Literature, 1923
Publication	Easter 1916, The Second Coming and A Prayer for My Daughter appeared in the volume Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921); Sailing to Byzantium opens The Tower (1928)
Genre	Lyric poetry — political elegy, prophetic poem, meditative lyric, prayer-poem
Setting	Dublin (Easter 1916); a visionary world-stage (The Second Coming); an imagined voyage from Ireland to ancient Byzantium; the poet's tower home during a storm (A Prayer for My Daughter)
Narration / Form	First-person meditative speaker throughout; Easter 1916 uses short ballad-like lines with a refrain; Sailing to Byzantium and A Prayer for My Daughter use formal eight-line stanzas
Famous remark	W. H. Auden, in his elegy for Yeats, wrote that "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry"

Themes & Technique

1. **Irish nationalism and patriotism (দেশপ্রেম).** Easter 1916 turns the executed rebels — MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly and Pearse — into national martyrs, promising they will be remembered "Wherever green is worn". But Yeats is not a blind flag-waver: he also warns that "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart". In the exam, always show BOTH his tribute and his doubt — this double attitude is what examiners reward.
2. **History as cycle: the gyres (চক্র).** Yeats believed civilization rises and falls in 2000-year spirals, explained in his prose book *A Vision*. The *Second Coming* dramatizes the moment one cycle ends: "the centre cannot hold". This theme answers the very common Part B question on Yeats's "concept of history or the rise and fall of civilizations".
3. **Old age versus youth.** *Sailing to Byzantium* opens with "That is no country for old men" — the natural world belongs to the young, the sensual, the dying. The aged speaker seeks escape into the deathless world of art. Contrast is the key device: young lovers, birds and fish set against the "tattered coat upon a stick".
4. **Art and immortality (অমরত্ব).** Byzantium symbolizes the perfect unity of art, religion and life. The golden bird the speaker wants to become never decays; art conquers time. This is Yeats's answer to bodily decay and death.
5. **Innocence, custom and ceremony.** In *A Prayer for My Daughter*, Yeats prays that his daughter will have moderate beauty, learned courtesy and deep-rooted innocence, growing like a green laurel tree in one dear place. Custom and ceremony — tradition and ritual — protect the soul from the storm of modern anarchy (নৈরাজ্য).
6. **The personal made universal.** Yeats always starts from his own life — his love for Maud Gonne, his friends in the Rising, his own old age, his newborn daughter — and lifts it into a statement about all humanity. This directly serves the repeated essay question "Discuss the personal elements of Yeats's poetry".
7. **Violence and anarchy of the modern world.** Written amid war and revolution, *The Second Coming* and *A Prayer for My Daughter* both picture a world drowning in blood, where "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" — lines quoted endlessly about every modern crisis.

Classroom techniques:

- **Symbolism:** the gyre, the rough beast, Byzantium, the golden bird, the stone, the storm, the laurel tree — Yeats is the master **symbolist** of modern English poetry.
- **Oxymoron / paradox:** "A terrible beauty is born" joins two opposite ideas to capture his mixed feelings about the Rising.
- **Refrain (ধুয়া):** the repeated line "A terrible beauty is born" structures *Easter 1916* like a ritual chant.
- **Allusion (ইঙ্গিত):** to the Bible (the *Second Coming* of Christ, Bethlehem), to Greek myth (Helen of Troy in *A Prayer for My Daughter*), and to Irish history and legend.
- **Contrast / antithesis:** youth against age, body against soul, innocence against hatred, anarchy against ceremony.
- **Prophetic tone** and **apocalyptic imagery** in *The Second Coming*.
- **Formal eight-line stanza** giving a slow, ceremonial movement in *Sailing to Byzantium* and *A Prayer for My Daughter*.

Key Quotations — memorize

- "A terrible beauty is born." — refrain of *Easter 1916*; use for the oxymoron of tribute mixed with doubt.
- "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart." — *Easter 1916*; the danger of fanaticism turning the human heart to stone.
- "MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse" — *Easter 1916*, final stanza; the roll-call of martyrs, named "as a mother names her child".
- "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" — *The Second Coming*; the collapse of civilization.

- "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." — The Second Coming; the moral confusion of the modern age.
- "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" — the closing question of The Second Coming; the terrifying new era.
- "That is no country for old men." — the opening of Sailing to Byzantium; the sensual world has no place for the aged.
- "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" — Sailing to Byzantium; the scarecrow image of old age.
- "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" — Sailing to Byzantium; the burning soul trapped in the decaying body.
- "How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born?" — A Prayer for My Daughter; Yeats's final answer to the world's storm.

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
W. H. Auden	In his elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" delivered the famous verdict that "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry" — Ireland's troubles were the source of Yeats's art	Patriotic poet / Irish nationalism essays
T. S. Eliot	Honoured Yeats as one of those rare poets whose personal history became part of the history of their age	Personal elements essay; Yeats's general greatness
Richard Ellmann	In Yeats: The Man and the Masks read the poetry as a lifelong dialogue between the self and its opposing mask or anti-self	Personal elements; the tension between private man and public poet
Cleanth Brooks	Analysed The Second Coming through Yeats's system in A Vision, treating the gyres as a serious theory of history, not mere decoration	Concept of history; myth and history questions
Frank Kermode	In Romantic Image argued that Yeats inherited the Romantic faith in the timeless image and the isolated artist	Romantic elements; Sailing to Byzantium as the triumph of the image
Edmund Wilson	In Axel's Castle placed Yeats within the Symbolist movement, bridging Romanticism and modern literature	Symbols of Yeats's poetry essay
Harold Bloom	Saw Yeats as the heir of the great Romantics, constantly wrestling with Blake and Shelley	Romantic elements; visionary quality of his poetry

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

RTC 1 — "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart."  **Very likely** (the Easter 1916 tribute question appears in both the 2019 and 2020 lists)

These lines occur in W. B. Yeats's political elegy Easter 1916, written after the failed Easter Rising in Dublin, when the Irish rebel leaders were executed by the British. Just before these lines, Yeats compares the rebels' fixed purpose to a stone lying in the middle of a living stream: the stream — clouds, birds, horses — changes minute by minute, but the stone never moves. Here the poet draws the moral: when people sacrifice themselves too long for a single cause, their hearts harden into stone; fanaticism (গোঁড়াফি) kills the natural, changing life of the heart. The lines are significant because they reveal Yeats's honest

double attitude: he honours the martyrs deeply, yet fears what endless sacrifice does to human nature. This tension between tribute and doubt — summed up in the refrain "A terrible beauty is born" — is the emotional centre of the whole poem, and quoting the refrain alongside these lines will earn full marks.

RTC 2 — "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." 🔥 **Very likely** (Yeats's concept of history is a repeated Part B item in both years, and this passage is its core evidence)

These famous lines come from the first stanza of W. B. Yeats's prophetic poem *The Second Coming*, written in 1919 in the shadow of the First World War. The falcon has flown beyond the falconer's call, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", and "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" — a blood-dimmed tide drowning innocence everywhere. In this context Yeats delivers his diagnosis of the modern moral world: good people have lost all faith and courage, while evil people burn with fanatical energy. The lines are significant for two reasons. First, they express Yeats's cyclical theory of history: the 2000-year Christian gyre is spinning apart, and a new, darker age approaches in the shape of the "rough beast" slouching towards Bethlehem. Second, they have become perhaps the most quoted description of political crisis in modern English poetry, proving Yeats's power to turn a private system of thought into universal prophecy.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

Short note 1 — Yeats's concept of history / the rise and fall of civilizations 🔥 **Very likely** (appears word-for-word in both the 2019 and 2020 question lists)

Yeats did not believe that history moves in a straight line of progress. In his prose book *A Vision* he explained that history moves in great circles or spirals which he called "gyres" (চক্রাকার গতি) — imagined as two cones spinning inside each other. Each civilization lasts roughly two thousand years; as one gyre widens to its limit, it loses control and collapses, and an opposite gyre begins. The Christian era, born at Bethlehem, was in Yeats's view reaching its end in the violent twentieth century. *The Second Coming* dramatizes exactly this turning point. The image of the falcon flying beyond the falconer's voice shows civilization escaping all control, so that "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". What comes next is not the gentle return of Christ but a "rough beast" that "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born" — a new, pitiless age rising from the ruins of the old. The same sense of historical storm blows through *A Prayer for My Daughter*, where the poet's family shelters from the "roof-levelling wind". Thus, for Yeats, history is a wheel of rise and fall, creation and destruction, endlessly repeating.

Short note 2 — The symbol of Byzantium 🔥 **Very likely** ("What does Byzantium symbolize?" is asked in both the 2019 and 2020 lists)

Byzantium was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire (modern Istanbul), famous for its golden mosaics (মোজাইক শিল্প) and sacred art. In *Sailing to Byzantium*, however, it is not a real travel destination but a rich symbol. First, it symbolizes the world of art and intellect as opposed to the sensual world of the young: Ireland belongs to lovers, birds and "dying generations", while Byzantium holds the "monuments of unageing intellect". Second, it symbolizes immortality. The old speaker, "a tattered coat upon a stick", begs the sages standing in God's holy fire to gather him "into the artifice of eternity", so that after death he may take the form of a golden bird that never decays. Third, Byzantium symbolizes an ideal (আদর্শ) civilization in which religion, art and daily life were perfectly united — the exact opposite of modern disorder. The voyage to Byzantium is therefore really the soul's journey: from flesh to spirit, from time to eternity, from dying nature to deathless art. For full marks, contrast Byzantium with the "country" of the first stanza and quote at least one of these phrases.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

"Write an essay on W. B. Yeats as a patriotic poet." 🔥 **Very likely**

(In both the 2019 and 2020 lists and marked v.v.i. by the compiler; the listed alternatives — "What attitude to politics does Yeats show in his poems?" and "Discuss W. B. Yeats as a poet of Irish nationalism" — are answered by this same essay.)

W. B. Yeats is Ireland's national poet, yet his patriotism (দেশপ্রেম) is never simple flag-waving. He loved Ireland passionately — its myths, its landscape, its people — but he distrusted violent politics and mob hatred. His greatness as a patriotic poet lies

exactly in this honesty: he praises Ireland's martyrs while questioning the cost of their sacrifice. W. H. Auden captured this truth in his elegy for Yeats with the famous verdict that "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry": Ireland was both the wound and the inspiration of his art.

Easter 1916 is the supreme proof. On Easter Monday 1916, Irish rebels seized buildings in Dublin and proclaimed a republic; the British crushed the Rising and executed its leaders. Before the Rising, Yeats confesses, he had thought of these men and women as ordinary figures of Dublin life, exchanged with them only "polite meaningless words", and believed Ireland was a comic land "where motley is worn" — motley being the dress of a fool or jester (ভাঁড়ের পোশাক). The executions changed everything: "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born." The refrain is a deliberate oxymoron. The Rising is "terrible" because it brought blood and death; it is "beauty" because it transformed ordinary clerks and school-teachers into immortal heroes. This double vision is Yeats's distinctive patriotic voice.

The tribute becomes most moving in the final stanza, where Yeats performs the sacred national duty of naming the dead: "MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse". He writes their names into verse "as a mother names her child", promising they will live "Wherever green is worn" — green being the national colour of Ireland. Most remarkably, he even honours MacBride, the man who had married and mistreated Maud Gonne, the woman Yeats loved; earlier in the poem he calls him a "drunken, vainglorious lout", yet he still numbers him among the heroes. Personal bitterness is set aside before national sacrifice: patriotism purifies even the poet's private hatred.

Yet Yeats never surrenders his critical mind. In the third movement of the poem he compares the rebels' fanatical single-mindedness to a stone that troubles "the living stream": everything in nature changes minute by minute, but the stone never moves. Then comes the warning: "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart." He even wonders whether the deaths were necessary at all, since England might still have kept her promise of self-rule. This questioning does not weaken his patriotism; it deepens it into tragic wisdom. As Richard Ellmann's classic study shows, Yeats's poetry is always a dialogue between opposing selves, and here the romantic nationalist debates the sceptical humanist within a single poem.

His political attitude extends across the other syllabus poems. The Second Coming, written amid the aftershocks of world war and revolution, shows what he feared in all politics: "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world", and "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." In A Prayer for My Daughter he prays that his child may be protected from opinionated hatred — the fanatical politics that, he believed, had wasted the beauty and grace of Maud Gonne. True national health, for Yeats, lies not in screaming opinions but in rootedness, "custom and ceremony".

In conclusion, Yeats is a patriotic poet of a rare and mature kind. He gave Ireland's martyrs immortality in verse, helped found a national theatre, and built his art on Irish myth and history; yet he refused to let love of country harden into fanaticism. His patriotism unites celebration and criticism, heart and intellect — and that is why Easter 1916 remains one of the greatest political poems in the English language.

"Write a critical appreciation of the poem 'Sailing to Byzantium'." 🔥 Very likely

(Appears in both the 2019 and 2020 lists; preparing it also answers the repeated Part B questions on old age, youth-versus-age, and the symbol of Byzantium.)

Sailing to Byzantium, the opening poem of Yeats's volume The Tower (1928), is his profoundest meditation on old age, art and immortality. Written when the poet was past sixty, it dramatizes an old man's escape from the sensual country of the young to the holy city of art, where the soul may put on a body of gold that never dies. Frank Kermode, in Romantic Image, reads Yeats as the great inheritor of the Romantic faith in the timeless image — and this poem turns personal despair about ageing into one of the most triumphant symbols in modern poetry.

The poem opens with a magnificent gesture of rejection: "That is no country for old men." Ireland — and by extension the whole natural world — belongs to "The young / In one another's arms", to birds in the trees, to salmon-filled waterfalls and mackerel-crowded seas, to everything that is begotten, born, and dies. The first stanza overflows with images of fertility (উর্বরতা) and sensual music, but Yeats's point is tragic: caught in that music, the young neglect the "monuments of unageing intellect" — the great works of the mind that never grow old. The world of the body has no place for the aged.

The second stanza gives the poem's unforgettable picture of old age: "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" — a scarecrow (কাকতাদুয়া), empty and ridiculous — unless the soul claps its hands and sings, and sings louder

for every tatter in its mortal dress. Since there is no singing school for the soul except the study of the monuments of its own magnificence, the speaker has sailed the seas and come "To the holy city of Byzantium". The voyage is symbolic: a journey from flesh to spirit, from time to eternity, from nature to art. Byzantium, the ancient centre of sacred mosaic art, stands for a civilization in which art, religion and daily life were perfectly one.

The third stanza rises into prayer. The speaker calls upon the sages standing in God's holy fire, as in the gold mosaic of a wall, to descend and become the singing-masters of his soul. Then come the most painful lines in the poem: "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" — the heart still burns with longing while chained to a decaying body that no longer knows what it is. He begs to be gathered "into the artifice of eternity": not natural life, which must die, but artifice — art — which endures forever.

The final stanza completes the transformation. Once out of nature, the speaker will never again take his bodily form from any natural thing; instead he will become a bird of hammered gold and gold enamelling, such as Grecian goldsmiths made to keep a drowsy Emperor awake, singing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium "Of what is past, or passing, or to come". The golden bird is the perfect resolution of the whole poem: it is a singer like the natural birds of stanza one, yet deathless; it is a work of art, yet it sings of time itself. The living bird must die; the golden bird sings forever.

Technically the poem is a masterpiece. Its four formal eight-line stanzas move with ceremonial dignity; its structure is built on antithesis (বৈপরীত্য) — nature against art, youth against age, the dying animal against the golden bird; its imagery progresses from teeming seas to holy fire to hammered gold. Edmund Wilson, in *Axel's Castle*, placed Yeats among the great Symbolists, and here every object — the sea-voyage, the fire, the mosaic, the bird — carries layered symbolic meaning.

In conclusion, Sailing to Byzantium transforms the private misery of an ageing man into a universal statement about the power of art to defeat time. It does not deny death; it answers death. The poem itself — still golden, still sung after a century — is the best proof of its own argument: the artist dies, but the artifice of eternity endures.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	Easter 1916: failed Dublin rising; Yeats honours the executed rebels but questions the cost — "A terrible beauty is born". The Second Coming: the Christian era collapses; a "rough beast" brings a dark new age (gyres = cycles of history). Sailing to Byzantium + A Prayer for My Daughter: an old man escapes into immortal art; a father prays for his daughter's rooted innocence, custom and ceremony.
2 must-quotes	"A terrible beauty is born." — "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold"
2 backup quotes	"That is no country for old men." — "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."
2 critics	W. H. Auden: "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry"; Frank Kermode (Romantic Image): Yeats as heir of the Romantic timeless image
Technique words	Symbolism, oxymoron, refrain, gyre, allusion, antithesis, apocalyptic imagery, ceremonial eight-line stanza
Top 3 likely essays	1. Yeats as patriotic poet / Irish nationalism 🔥 2. Critical appreciation of Sailing to Byzantium 🔥 3. Symbols of Yeats's poetry (also covers personal elements) 🔥

Exam-timing tip: In the 4-hour paper give each 15-mark essay a strict 45 minutes — spend the first 5 planning (thesis + 4 points + 2 quotations), write for 35, and keep the last 5 to check that every quotation is exact.